

# Historic Seattle Bike Route:

## The Lake Union/Lake Washington Paths

**Distance:** 15.6 miles

**Difficulty:** Moderate

**Total elevation gain:** 935 feet

**Directions to start:** Denny Park borders Dexter Ave. N., Denny Way, John St. and 9th Ave. N. It is a few blocks east of the Space Needle. There is plentiful paid street parking, with a two-hour limit.

Before there were cars in Seattle, there were bikes. Cycling became a craze in the 1890s, and as Seattle was expanding north from downtown toward Lake Union, bike trails were created so that riders could visit the wild lakeshores of Lake Union and Lake Washington. Cabled streetcars took residents of the expanding city out to the University of Washington and neighborhoods at Madison Park and Leschi, and criss-crossed Capitol Hill.

It was not until the 1890s that Seattle saw any paved streets, and prior to that time, cycling in Seattle was a perilous effort. In fact, Assistant City Engineer George Cotterill, who's credited with mapping many of the early bike routes, wrote this about street conditions: "The main thoroughfares of the City were strewn with wrecks of old planking which had survived from five to ten years of traffic. An occasional lonely cyclist might be seen picking out a tortuous course among such difficulties, and the general public naturally and properly wondered where the fun came in."

The city began paving downtown streets with bricks in 1893, primarily due to the clamor for better bicycling surfaces. But the short runs were evidently not satisfying to cyclists wishing to get some distance under their wheels, so a series of bicycle paths was created: around Lake Union, up to the military post Fort Lawton on Magnolia, between Ballard and Fremont, and out to Lake Washington.

On Sept. 19, 1896, nearly 200 cyclists paraded with lanterns on their bikes to celebrate the opening of the Lake Union Path. It stretched 2.5 miles up the east shore of the lake, and consisted of sidewalks, streets, bridges and a dedicated bike path. Later, it was connected with a half-mile path on the north side and other links to form a 10-mile route around the lake.

The next year, the route was extended, and on June 19, 1897, a 10-mile cinder path to Lake Washington was opened. It ran along what are now Lakeview and Interlaken boulevards.

Today, a number of streets exist that evolved from sections of early bike routes, but the combined Lake Union/Lake Washington path provides the only historic route that can be substantially ridden by present-day cyclists.

The Lake Washington path started at 8th and Pine St. in downtown Seattle, but to avoid the traffic, this route begins a bit north of the city center. It starts at Denny Park, Seattle's first public park, which was given to the city

by the founding Denny Family in 1864, and was opened as a park in 1884. The small park is graced by large trees, with a formal design of angled paths coming in from all corners to a central circle.

Depart the northeast corner of the park into the urban renewal of the South Lake Union neighborhood. In a half-mile you'll be riding along the south edge of Lake Union, looking at yachts and float planes beyond a row of upscale restaurants. The new Lake Union Park joins the Center for Wooden Boats here, and holds promise as a stunning new public space. Curve around the east side of the lake and ride north, passing docks for a float plane company and NOAA, before coming to a floating residential neighborhood. Look for houseboats dressed up with rooftop gardens and berthed kayaks.

At the heart of the neighborhood is Lynn Street Park, across from Pete's Supermarket, where you can stop and see the homes from its gaily tiled lakeside benches.

The park has an interesting bit of history. Pete the grocer led an effort to build this park, and then the community rebuilt it after a driverless delivery truck caromed through its tiny space and crashed into the lake in 1995.

At the north edge of this neighborhood, climb east one block to Eastlake Avenue, where you're at the intersection with the University Bridge. Continue riding east into the Portage Bay neighborhood, then tackle one of two significant climbs on the tour, up to the north edge of Capitol Hill and Roanoke Park. This also was land originally owned by a member of the Denny family, and was acquired by the city in 1908 to be used as a resting place for cyclists and hikers making the long trek to Lake Washington.

But the prime cycling respite lay a bit beyond the park, in the wilds of Interlaken. The route continues along the side of a heavily wooded ravine, and for a mile you are riding through a verdant landscape that must look much the same as it did to cyclists more than a century ago. Along this route, lost but not forgotten, was the "Halfway House," a building that served as a breakfast and lunch café and rest stop for cycling tourists. It was most likely located below street level, west and north of the intersection of Interlaken Boulevard and Interlaken Drive.

Today, a short section of Interlaken Blvd. is closed to all vehicles except bicycles, so a rider can truly say he or she is on the city's original bike path.

Back on the streets, drop down to the Lake Washington Loop bike route that parallels the Washington Park Arboretum. As you cross E. Madison St., imagine early cyclists meeting the streetcar line here and sharing a wooden trestle over the swampy lowlands of Madison Valley.

Ride by the Bush School, then join Lake Washington Boulevard and wind down to the lake, passing Denny Blaine and Madrona parks before cutting away from the lake at Leschi. The small shopping district here makes for a good "halfway house" on this short tour. There's a branch of Seattle's famous coffee chain, a grocery store and a family deli in the two blocks of businesses.

Depart Leschi by staying on Lake Washington Blvd. and climbing through Frink Park to the edge of the hill above the I-90 tunnel. An overlook above the tunnel entrance provides another bit of history: the original name for the bridge. The "Homer M. Hadley Memorial Bridge" was named after a pioneering Seattle engineer who designed and proposed the first concrete floating bridge in 1920. He saw the first of these bridges built in 1940. Today, one of the two broad freeways includes a protected bike/pedestrian lane often used by commuter and recreational cyclists to get to our eastern suburbs.

Today, though, turn west instead of east and enter the tunnel under the Mount Baker neighborhood to ride toward downtown Seattle. Although the route is a bit south of the historic bike path, it's today's best bet for

getting comfortably back into town. You're riding the western end of the Mountains to Sound Greenway, which takes you to the north edge of Beacon Hill. From there, with stunning views of the sports stadia and downtown Seattle, head north through a bustling Asian shopping district.

Along the route north on 12th Avenue, pass the Seattle University playfields, where one of Seattle's first bicycle racetracks was built. The Triangle Bicycle Club, organized by the YMCA, opened a track in 1895 between Cherry and Jefferson that presumably thrilled residents with track racing under electric lights.

The route continues up to Volunteer Park, another early municipal park. The land was purchased in 1876, but was much improved by the end of the century. Early in the 1900s, a reservoir and water tower were added, and formal plans for the grounds were drawn up by the Olmsted Brothers, famous landscape designers. Today, it hosts the Seattle Asian Art Museum, the Conservatory (which dates from 1912) and an iconic picture spot for visitors: a massive black truck-tire shaped sculpture called Black Sun, created by Isamu Noguchi. The sculpture's center hole serves as a perfect frame for the Space Needle.

Depart the park with a downhill spin (mind your brakes) to the western edge of Capitol Hill at Lakeview Boulevard. Here, as you cross over I-5, is a great view of Lake Union and Queen Anne Hill beyond. Drop down to Eastlake Avenue and ride past, or to, the flagship REI outdoor equipment store. From there, it's a bit more downhill through the morphing South Lake Union neighborhood to return to the park and end the tour.

In this tour's short, 15 miles, you've visited three of Seattle's earliest parks and viewed some of the city's historic infrastructure. Now, don't you feel closer to those pioneer cyclists?

#### **Route Guide:**

0.0 At corner of John St. and 9th Ave. N. turn left onto 9th into the bike lane.

0.1 Right onto Thomas St. in one block

0.2 Left onto Westlake Ave. N. in one block.

0.5 Cross Valley St. at crosswalk into Lake Union Park. Turn right onto sidewalk next to streetcar tracks. Caution: Mind the cross-traffic into restaurant parking lots for next half-mile.

1.1 As sidewalk ends at a boat dock, curve right onto the protected pedestrian/bikeway on the street and continue forward.

1.2 Left onto Fairview Ave. E. to ride along the east edge of Lake Union.

1.9 Pass Lynn Street Park.

2.0 Road curves right and becomes Roanoke St.

2.1 Turn left onto tiny Yale Ave. E. in 1.5 blocks.

As Yale ends, turn right onto E. Edgar St., then in 100 yards turn left into alley. Follow blue bike-route signs that say "Cheshiahud Loop."

As alley ends, turn left onto E. Hamlin St., follow the signs again downhill to Fairview in one-half block.

2.3 Turn right onto Fairview to continue along the lake, past Fairview Park and P-Patch on right.

2.8 Right onto Fuhrman Ave. E. and climb one block to Eastlake and the University Bridge.

2.9 Cross Eastlake and continue east on Fuhrman for four blocks.

3.2 Right on E. Shelby St., just past the Canal Market.

3.3 Left onto 11th Ave. E. in one block.

3.4 Right onto E. Hamlin St. for a steep, block-long climb.

Left onto 10th Ave. E. in one block. Roanoke Park is ahead on right.

3.6 Left onto E. Roanoke St.

3.75 Right onto E. Interlaken Blvd. after crossing over SR 520. Caution: curvy road with limited sight distance. Stay to right and watch for traffic.

4.4 Stay left at a curving Y joining Interlaken Drive E., and go downhill. In one-half block, stay straight to enter the off-street trail section at the bollards. (Note: Turning right and climbing here takes you to north Capitol Hill and the north end of Volunteer Park.)

4.8 Continue forward to return to E. Interlaken Blvd. as the off-street portion ends.

4.9 Left onto 24th Ave. E. in one block. Caution: Fast traffic. For safer route, ride near-side sidewalk downhill for one block to stoplight.

Right onto Boyer in one block and continue east.

5.2 Right onto 26th Ave. E., follow bike-route signs for the Lake Washington Loop.

5.3 Left onto E. Galer St., continue to follow bike-route signs.

5.7 Continue straight at intersection with Ward as street becomes 28th Ave. E.; follow bike-route signs.

5.9 Continue straight across E. Madison St. at light.

6.0 Left onto E. Harrison St. in two blocks. Caution: busy arterial.

6.5 Pass The Bush School and, at the intersection with 37th Ave. E., go forward onto Lake Washington Blvd., which curves downhill and to the right.

6.7 Continue straight at intersection with 39th Ave. E. to stay on Lake Washington Blvd.

Curve to right in one block at roundabout by Denny Blaine Park to stay on Lake Washington Blvd. and ride along the lake.

8.05 Arrive at Leschi neighborhood business district. As lake road becomes Lakeside Ave., turn right to stay on Lake Washington Blvd. and climb away from the lake. (Alternate route: continue forward on Lakeside to Coleman Park, then climb through the park and retrace route to this ride's next turn at the I-90 overlook and tunnel/bridge entrance.)

8.5 Go straight through intersection with S. Jackson St. and S. Frink Place, continuing on Lake Washington Blvd.

9.2 Left onto S. Irving St. above the I-90 bridge, then right in one-fourth block, past bollards. Stay to the right to enter the tunnel. (Going left here leads to the bike/pedestrian route across the I-90 floating bridge.)

9.5 Exit the tunnel into Sam Smith Park. Continue forward as trail crosses Martin Luther King Jr. Way at stoplight.

9.9 Cross 23rd Ave. S. at stoplight, then turn left on the sidewalk and, in 100 yards, right to continue on the trail. The trail then runs along the south side of I-90 to the edge of Beacon Hill. (Note: turning right instead of left onto the sidewalk on 23rd takes you to another leg of the trail on the north side of I-90, which links to Rainier Ave. S. and Dearborn, and then to the International District and sports stadia.)

10.5 Pass Taejon Park, Seattle's Korean sister-city park.

10.8 Trail ends at Pacific Medical Center at S. Charles St. and Golf Drive S. Go right onto Golf, which becomes 12th Ave. S., on the sidewalk to head toward Capitol Hill. **Caution:** very busy arterial with no bike space. Consider riding sidewalk to Yesler Way intersection.

11.3 Cross Yesler Way and continue north on 12th in bike lane. (Note: Turning left at Jackson or Yesler takes you downhill to Pioneer Square and the waterfront.)

11.6 Pass playfields at Seattle University, where one of Seattle's first bicycle velodromes existed in the early 20th Century. (See history article at [http://www.bikingpugetsound.com/article\\_EarlyCyclinginSeattle.htm](http://www.bikingpugetsound.com/article_EarlyCyclinginSeattle.htm).)

12.3 Continue forward at intersection with Pine St. (Note: Turning left here takes you into downtown Seattle's main shopping district and to the Pike Place Market.)

12.9 Right onto E. Roy St., a nearly hidden alley-size street one block north of Mercer intersection.

Left onto 13th Ave. E. in one short block.

Right onto E. Aloha St. in one block. **Caution:** mind the traffic on this curving hill.

13.1 Left onto 14th Ave. E.

13.3 Arrive at entrance to Volunteer Park. Ride through the park, past Seattle Asian Art Museum. At the all-glass Conservatory, turn left and proceed downhill on this road, which exits the park at Prospect and 12th.

13.6 Right onto E. Prospect St.

13.8 Cross 10th Ave. E. to stay on Prospect.

13.9 Left on Boylston Ave. E.

Right on Bellevue Ave. E. in one block.

14.1 Right onto Belmont Ave. E. after curving downhill. **Caution:** busy arterial, steep downhill grade.

14.2 Go straight onto Lakeview Blvd. E. at stop sign, crossing over I-5 toward Lake Union.

14.5 Left onto Eastlake Ave. E. Caution: busy arterial.

14.9 Right on John St., arriving at flagship REI store.

Right onto Yale Ave. N. in one block.

15.1 Left onto Harrison St. in two blocks. **Caution:** streetcar tracks at angles in road. Always cross rail tracks perpendicular to the track (at right angles to your tires) to avoid catching a wheel.

15.5 Left onto 9th Ave. N.

15.6 Arrive back at Denny Park to end tour.